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ARVO: Digital Archive of the Volto Santo. An Ancient Archive in the Digital Age

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ARVO Digital Archive of the Volto Santo (Italy)

Introduction: the persistence of different formats

ARVO (**Figure 1**) is an ever growing archive pursuing the collection and progressive cataloguing of the material produced on the Volto Santo of Lucca with reference to its historical dimension, legend and cult. It's a unique tool having its counterpart in a project carried out by the University of Tours, a partner of ARVO, which is currently developing a digital archive devoted to the figure of Saint Martin. However, ARVO is first and foremost a complete project originating from an increasingly popular concept in the field of humanistic research which is starting to catch on in Italy too - although with a certain delay: the sharing of knowledge.



Figure 1: ARVO Logo – Digital Archive of the Volto Santo

(ARVO is the acronym for Archivio Digitale del Volto Santo)

Some time ago, the legendary father of ARPANET, Vinton Cerf, stirred controversy by warning in an article against a 'digital desert' that would be threatening our future. As operative systems and softwares are updated, documents and images saved with old technologies become increasingly inaccessible (Sample, 2015). Everyone who is used to working with information systems is quite familiar with this issue and has learnt how to tackle it. The so called "digital desert" is a serious problem requiring a steady update of

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both systems and documents. For this reasons, a website which is no longer updated is a dying one. Besides, it is also important to underline that contents with increased chances of survival are those featuring a constant and widespread circulation. Such statement no longer refers to an exclusively technical concept of expertise: this is, indeed, a fundamental principle of textual philology. With more transcriptions and circulating copies of the same document there is an increased possibility that one of them may survive over time and throughout history, to be preserved intact into the future.

A similar event occurred when the BBC lost many portions of the famous Tv series Doctor Who. In 2006, in an attempt to put a remedy to the damage, the British broadcaster launched an appeal to the audience, and «episodes thought to be lost forever re-emerged from garage sales, attics and other strange places». After promising a prize, the BBC invited everybody to check their attics, garages and spare bedrooms for Doctor Who's old episodes. This event, commented by IT journalist Paolo Attivissimo, has led to unexpected consequences, as deleted episodes were recovered and saved thanks to illegal copies recorded by viewers with the help of audio-recorders or by filming the screen of their own tv. Other iconic tv series - such as The Avengers suffered the same fate; in Italy, the dubbing track of an episode of the cult series Space 1999 was lost and subsequently recovered and newly released in DVD format thanks to a fan's homemade recording (Attivissimo, 2006).

This incident shows how the sharing of a content represents the best guarantee to preserve it, and this is undoubtedly true both for ancient and contemporary documents. Any format, from the sturdy parchment to the sophisticated digital memories, can be exposed to wear and tear and incidents which may cause its destruction. ARVO works on such contents and, in this sense, it is to be regarded more as a constantly evolving dynamic project, which develops and renews itself thanks to solid relationships with research institutions and conservation entities rather than a mere archive.

1. Open Access

A digital archive like ARVO relies on the basic principle of knowledge sharing and the concept of the Open Access, a protocol to which an increasing number of cultural realities within different fields of knowledge are adhering. In 2001, the capital of Hungary hosted the Budapest Open Access Initiative, which is regarded as the first historical meeting for the foundation of Open Access. In 2003, the Berlin Declaration on the open access to scientific literature drafted during a conference held at the Max Planck Society was the first written international statement on that subject. In Italy, the Berlin Declaration was followed by the Messina Declaration, which emerged on November 4, 2004, on occasion of a national workshop endorsing open access to research literature. Today, Open Access is an established approach for the dissemination of scientific knowledge, and its principles lay the foundations of the ARVO project.

In other words, ARVO creates an open access archive which can be accessed by everybody: researchers, students, scholars, enthusiasts, school institutions, travelers

having a special interest in cultural or religious tourism. The latter cohort is not to be underestimated, since today an increasing number of people sets off to reach pilgrimage destinations, in what has become a widespread and genuine movement of European itineraries, including, for example, the Santiago de Compostela routes, the network of the Vie Francigene, and the most recent path of the Vie Martiniane. However, given the extent of the phenomenon and besides economic opportunities meant in a strict sense, scholars are showing a growing interest in pilgrimage from the perspective of an historical and anthropological research. This is undoubtedly a positive fact, since, according to Marc Bloch, the road history of Europe before the 18th century is a subject which is far to be exhausted. In this sense, ARVO is a cutting edge project (**Figure 2**), at the intersection of a robust international tourist trend and a renewed interest of researchers in pilgrimage.



Figure 2: ARVO is awarded the Premio Italia Medievale (the Italian Medieval Prize). Multimedia section, Milan, November 28, 2015
Source: personal picture

2. Pilgrimage, the city and the archive

Lucca has a strong bond with pilgrimage, thanks to both its geographical location and the presence of one of the most worshipped statue-reliquary of the past. The favourable geographical location placed the city at the intersection of important Roman consular roads such as Cassia and Aurelia. Moreover, Lucca played a strategical role with reference to the Appennine passages and the proximity to the flourishing port of Pisa. Lucca was thus a crucial junction in the peninsular road network: this is the context where the cult of the Volto Santo was born, which became over time the identity symbol of the city (**Figure 3**). The statue-reliquary, dating back to the 11th century according to art historians, is surrounded by a legend that has made it very popular far beyond Italian borders already in early times. The chevalerie Ogier de Danemarck, an epic work of literature from the 11th-12th century, tells us about the tribute paid by Charlemagne to the Lucchese icon: «The king of Frankish stopped by

the river banks / and listened to the Mass in San Martino the great./The Volto of Lucca was there at the time/some say it's still there./Nicodemus carved it in Jerusalem /Charlemagne offered a shining, golden pallium to it, 1842, vv. 9076-9082).



Figure 3: A close-up of the Volto Santo adorned for the Feast of the Holy Cross

Source: Photo by I. Sabbatini

The literary narration is integrated with the account of William of Malmesbury who in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (12th century) recounts how the King of England William II, also known as William the Red, used to swear «per Vultum de Luca». (William of Malmesbury, 1840, pp. 492, 503). Finally, *La chanson des Aliscans*, another epic work written at the end of the 12th century, suggests a way to test the honesty of a jester: «You can put him to the test before the Volto of Lucca, who threw his shoe [to a Jester] across the church». (Aliscans, 1974, pp. 260-261; **Figure 4**).



Figure 4: The Volto Santo adorned with his treasure, on occasion of the Feast of the Holy Cross

Source: personal picture

These literary works are instrumental to understand the spreading of the cult of the

Volto Santo and the channels that supported its propagation. They also exemplify precisely the work carried out by ARVO: so far, all these materials, although known to scholars, were dispersed without an exact location in their historical and literary context. The systematic reorganisation and categorisation enables us to assert, for example, that the above mentioned literary works are coeval to the writing of the legend of Leobino, which has been attributed by historians like Chiara Frugoni to the Lucchese canonical context of the 12th century (Frugoni, 1982). Fundamentally, chronological data suggest that the development of the legend of the Volto Santo in a written form was concomitant with the propagation of its cult and knowledge in Frankish-speaking countries.

3. Materials and internal organization

All these chronicles and literary evidence have been collected alongside other sources and integrated into the ARVO archive. In order to better understand its format, it is important to illustrate the elements of its structure. First of all, the ARVO website can be accessed at the address archiviooltosanto.org, an intentionally short and immediate domain allowing an easy memorisation and quoting in different contexts. The website can be consulted in three languages, and features two menu systems: a first and superior one devoted to the educational aspects of the project, and a second and inferior one, which is more strictly connected to data filing. Over time, the same menus have undergone a transformation in order to adapt to contents upgrading and new developments of the project.

References, Manuscripts and Iconography were the first sections to be introduced; Places and Ancient Printings, i.e. books dating from 1450 to 1830, are currently also being added. The section References has been sorted according to Sources and Studies, thus allowing a search by author, title, year, bibliographical level and keywords. Once the work has been selected, it is possible to read its catalographic sheet, including bibliographic data of the publication according to the standards of the Dublin Core metadata system. The section Manuscripts is a particular precious and prestigious area (**Figures 5 and 6**), featuring the manuscripts of the legend of the Volto Santo, in part digitally reproduced by the ARVO project.



Figure 5: *Incipit* of the legend of the Volto Santo. State Archive of Lucca, Ms.110, first half of the 14th century
Source: personal picture



Figure 6: Capitoli della Compagnia del Volto Santo, 1306.
Source: Archivio Storico Diocesano di Lucca

Thanks to the partnership agreements with the Archive of State of Lucca and the Historical Diocesan Archive it is possible to see the digitalised images from the manuscripts of the Volto Santo which are preserved there. Likewise, the section Bibliography includes digital reproductions of copyright free works, with indication of the source. For every text provided with a digital version, the latter is made available for a free download.

The section Iconography is another valuable area of the website, featuring several images of the Volto Santo (**Figures 7, 8, 9 and 10**). Launched last year, the section has a main purpose the systematic cataloging of figurative representations of the Volto

Santo, regardless of the artistic medium or the year of production.



Figure 7: Volto Santo of Lucca, 15th Basilica of Aquileia (UD),
Source: photo by E. Andrian



Figure 8: Volto Santo of Lucca century, and minstrel, 17th century Bologna, Via Val d'Aposa
Source: personal picture



Figure 9: Pilgrimage banner, 14th century. Pas-de-Calais, France. Inscr.: S VV / LTI LVCEN / SIS
Source: Arvo



Figure 10: Pilgrimage banner, 14th century. Museum of London. Inscr. S VVLT / [LV]CEN / SIS
Source: Arvo

The first stage of the work involved the publication of the Italian records on the Lucchese crucifix, dating from the period between the 14th and the 16th century. During a second stage, which has taken place this year, the project has been focused on the images of the Volto Santo produced in the rest of the European territory in the years between 1350 and 1550.

In 2015, the project launched the streaming television ARVO Tv (**Figures 11, 12 and 13**), featuring a series of thematic lessons which saw the participation of most prominent experts of medieval history, history of arts, history of medieval hospitals, hagiography, numismatics, silk factories in Lucca and goldsmith's crafts with reference to the pilgrimage to the Volto Santo and its historically documented cult.



Figure 11: Filming the ARVO TV special episode entitled *Il tesoro del Volto Santo*, (The treasure of the Volto Santo) with A. Capitano, University of Pisa

Source: personal picture



Figure 12: The Crown of the Volto Santo, detail of the front decoration. The photo is part of the photo shoot for ARVO Tv

Source: personal picture



Figure 13: The Crown of the Volto Santo, detail of the cuspidal stamping. The photo is included in the photo shoot for ARVO Tv

Source: personal picture

The recorded lessons have been published on the ARVO website and are available for a free download. ARVO Tv is an especially appreciated tool, through which scholars and enthusiasts are enabled to enhance their knowledge on the proposed subjects. Given the number of requests received, ARVO is also developing a radio podcast - RadioARVO – where the video lessons will be adapted to the audio format and also integrated with other audio materials traced during the research, such as the recording of the lyric opera *Il calzare d'argento* by Ildebrando Pizzetti on a libretto by Riccardo Bacchelli, which was staged at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan in 1961.

The section *Places*, which will be online soon, consists of a thematic cartography relying on a system of georeferenced layers devoted to the places of cult, pilgrimage destinations and accommodation facilities inside and outside the city walls. This will allow to formulate a scientific hypothesis on pilgrim routes between the Lucchese territory and the surrounding areas. The interactive cartography of ARVO, in addition to the historical study, will enable an active fruition of the territory, with the possibility to identify a network of historical and artistic highlights to the benefit of cultural and religious tourism.

Conclusions

The project ARVO, funded by the *Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Lucca* and developed following the proposal of the *Mons Gaudii* Association relies on the formalised collaboration with different and prestigious institutional partners such as the *Museum and Archaeological complex of the Cathedral of Lucca*, the *State Archive of Lucca*, the *Diocesan Historical Archive of Lucca*, the *Library Capitolare Feliniana of Lucca*, the *Lucchese Photographic Archive "Arnaldo Fazzi"*, the *Lucchese Historical Institution*, *SISMEL (the International Society for the Study of Latin Middle Age)*, *ISISME (the Italian Institute for the Study of the Middle Age)*, the *University of Siena (Interdepartmental Center for the Study of the Hospital Santa Maria della Scala)* and

the University of Tours – France (Département d’Histoire et d’Archéologie). Furthermore, ARVO is supported by the *Municipality of Lucca*, the *Archdiocese of Lucca*, the *Superintendence for Fine Arts and Landscape of the Provinces of Lucca and Massa Carrara*, the *Minister of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism*.

ARVO has always tried to operate with an engaging approach, open to different collaborations (**Figure 14**).



Figure 14: Photo shooting of the Buonvisi Chapel. Detail of the counterfacade fresco: the *Transportation of the Volto Santo to Lucca*, cycle of the Buonvisi Chapel, 1580 circa. Villa Buonvisi, Monte San Quirico, Lucca

Source: personal picture

In two years, it has taken part in several public meetings and international conferences. This method has led to unexpected consequences: one of the most interesting aspects is the collaboration of people from all across Europe, who have sent images, bibliographic indications and pictures which have actively contributed to the production of in-depth information boxes or pages. However, the true surprise, since Lucca hosts one of the most important international comics events, was the group of authors who submitted the illustrated version of the legend of the Volto Santo (**Figure 15**). At the moment, the digital version is available at the ARVO archive, under the section graphic novel.



Figure 15: *The mystery of the Volto Santo*, Published by ComiXrevolution, September 2014. © 2014 pedrocar / a.locatelli / d.castellucci

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